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Responses to Gender Inequality in the Division of Family Work: The Status Quo Effect

Esther S. Kluwer¹

This study addresses responses to gender inequality in the division of family work as well as the outcomes of those responses. Ninety-eight husbands and 95 wives responded to stimulus information manipulated by means of scenarios. Participants reported more wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction when the wife was discontent with her spouse's contribution to family work, but the demand/withdraw interaction patterns were reported equally when the husband was discontent. The data showed support for the Status Quo Effect Hypothesis: The likelihood that the spouse's contribution to family work remained unchanged (i.e., status quo maintenance) was rated higher than the likelihood that the spouse would increase his/her contribution to family work. In line with this, when the wife was discontent, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was negatively related to the likelihood that the spouse would do more family work. Finally, participants reported a greater likelihood for discontent spouses than for content spouses to increase their own contribution, but discontent husbands were more likely to do so than discontent wives.

KEY WORDS: family work; gender inequality; marital conflict; demand/withdraw interaction; conflict outcomes; status quo effect.

The allocation of family work (i.e., housework and child care) is a "hot issue" in many relationships, especially among couples with young children, and it causes a substantial amount of dissatisfaction and marital conflict (Cowan *et al.*, 1985; Holmes and Murray, 1996; Kluwer *et al.*, 1996, 1997a, 1997b). How do people respond to gender inequalities and subsequent dis-

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satisfaction in their relationship? What happens when one spouse tries to change the division of labor because he or she is discontent with the status quo? Because more and more women participate in the labor force and relationships are gradually becoming more egalitarian, conflict about gender roles is inevitable and couples have to negotiate who does what in the household (Buunk *et al.*, 1997; see also Caycedo *et al.*, 1991; Goodnow and Bowes, 1994). Women will increasingly recognize their family arrangements as unfair and they may respond to the injustice, for example, by pushing for change (Thompson, 1991). Accordingly, we have to expand our knowledge about how couples negotiate the division of labor and understand how partners hinder or create change through their mutual interactions.

Although ample research has addressed the causes of inequality in the household, much less is known about the responses to inequality and injustice in the division of family work. According to justice theories, people are less satisfied with the division of labor the more it is perceived as unjust (cf. Mikula *et al.*). Perceived injustice and subsequent dissatisfaction may stem from inequity (Walster *et al.*, 1978), inequality (Deutsch, 1975), or when individuals' needs are not met (Mills and Clark, 1982). Because housework generally tends to be disliked (Robinson and Spitze, 1992) and given the beneficial effects of parents' involvement in child care (e.g., Baruch and Barnett, 1986; Deutsch *et al.*, 1993), spouses will generally strive for more rather than less participation from their spouse (cf. Kluwer *et al.*, 1996). Accordingly, spouses are more dissatisfied the less their spouse contributes to family work (Mikula *et al.*, 1997a).²

The predominating view of the division of labor is that of a fixed agreement between spouses. Prior research has failed to recognize that spouses actively negotiate and renegotiate the division of labor on a continuous basis. Therefore, recent research has provided an *interaction-based approach* by illuminating the issues, marital interaction patterns, and outcomes of conflict over the division of labor (Kluwer *et al.*, 1997a, 1997b, 1998). Within this framework, Kluwer and colleagues (1997b) reported research on how couples respond to discontent about the labor distribution through demand/withdraw interactions. They conducted two field experiments in which first-time parents responded to stimulus information manipulated by means of scenarios. Husbands and wives rated the extent to which demand/withdraw interaction patterns occurred when the conflict issue involved the wife

²There is some evidence that women are more satisfied with the division of family work and perceive it as more fair than would be expected given the inequality of the division of labor (e.g., Major, 1993; Mederer, 1993; Sanchez, 1994; Thompson, 1991). However, research has shown that conflict over the division of labor *does* exist (for reviews, see Caycedo *et al.*, 1991; Goodnow and Bowes, 1994; Kluwer *et al.*, 1996), especially among couples with egalitarian attitudes (Kluwer *et al.*, 1997a) and among couples with young children (Kluwer *et al.*, 1998).

versus the husband seeking change in the division of labor, and the extent to which spouses would reach their goal (i.e., status quo maintenance vs. change) in this conflict situation. The results showed that wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was the typical reaction to the typical conflict situation in which the wife is discontent with her husband's contribution to housework, while her husband wants to maintain the status quo. It further showed that defendants of the status quo were more likely to reach their goal than complainants, but discontent wives were more likely to accomplish change than discontent husbands when the conflict issue concerned their own gender stereotypical domain (i.e., family work).

As shown later, the studies by Kluwer *et al.* (1997b) left important questions unanswered. The present study therefore replicates and extends the findings of Kluwer *et al.* by addressing two research questions. First, how do couples respond to the (typical) conflict situation in which one spouse is dissatisfied with the division of family work and wants the other spouse to increase his or her contribution, whereas the other spouse is satisfied with the task allocation in the relationship? Hence, the starting point is spouses' discontent due to the fact that the other spouse contributes too little to family work. Second, what are the outcomes of conflict over the division of family work, that is, who "wins" the argument? This study tests two competing predictions with regard to whether conflicting spouses accomplish their goals (i.e., status quo maintenance vs. change).

Responses to Gender Inequality

The situation in which one spouse is discontent with the division of labor and wants the other to increase his or her contribution involves an asymmetrical structure: The discontent spouse wants to change the status quo and needs the other's active cooperation to reach that objective, whereas the other spouse wants to maintain the status quo and can reach this goal by doing what he or she normally does. In a conflict with this particular structure, the discontent spouse is likely to pressure the other for change, while the other will avoid a discussion that may lead to a change in his or her own behavior. In close relationships, this type of interaction has been labeled a *demand/withdraw interaction*: One spouse attempts to engage in a discussion, resorting to pressures and demands, while the other attempts to avoid conflict and withdraws from the discussion. Research has shown that in marital conflict women tend to demand, which involves pressuring, requesting or demanding change, nagging, blaming, accusing, and criticizing, and men tend to withdraw, which involves physical withdrawal, becoming silent, defending, and avoiding a dis-

cussion (e.g., Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Christensen and Schenk, 1991; Cowan *et al.*, 1985; Gottman and Krokoff, 1989; Heavey *et al.*, 1993; Kelley *et al.*, 1978; Rusbult, 1993).

Why is it that women generally have a tendency to demand and that men have a tendency to withdraw in marital conflict? A social structural explanation is that men are the primary beneficiaries of the traditional marriage, are more likely to have structured the relationship to their liking and subsequently have little or less interest in changing the status quo (Heavey *et al.*, 1993). Women tend to be less satisfied with the status quo of the relationship and engagement in conflict is their means of changing the relationship according to their desires (cf. Scanzoni, 1978; Scanzoni and Fox, 1980). Inequality and disadvantage lead to emotional distress, including anger (Mirowsky and Ross, 1995; Reichle and Montada, 1994). Women have higher levels of anger due to inequalities in the relationship and are more likely to express their anger than men (Ross and Van Wiligen, 1996). As women more frequently find themselves in the deprived position in close relationships, they have a higher probability to show demanding behavior, whereas men have a higher probability to show withdrawing behavior because they more frequently find themselves in the advantaged position.

An individual differences explanation claims that men have developed a *self differentiated from others*, whereas women have developed a *self in relation to others* (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986). Subsequent socialization reinforces men's achievement orientation and need for autonomy, and women's relationship orientation and need for connectedness and commonality of experience (Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Cross and Madison, 1997; Eagly, 1987; Heavey *et al.*, 1993; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1987). This gender difference permeates social interactions and, in close relationships, it predicts women to be pursuing in their search for connectedness, whereas it predicts men to withdraw in pursuit of their autonomy.

The structure of the conflict predicts husbands and wives to demand when they desire a change in their spouses' contribution to the division of labor and to withdraw when they want to maintain the division of labor the way it is (cf. Klinetob and Smith, 1996). The gender difference in conflict behavior in close relationships predicts wives to demand and husbands to withdraw during conflict over the division of labor, regardless of the conflict structure. Following from this, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction will occur particularly when the wife wants to change the status quo and her husband does not (cf. Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Heavey *et al.*, 1993; Kluwer *et al.*, 1997b). The wife's desire for change enhances her tendency to demand, whereas the husband's desire to maintain the status quo enhances his tendency to withdraw. When the husband is dis-

content, wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction may both occur to a moderate degree. The husband's desire for change motivates him to demand, but withdrawal is induced by his tendency to withdraw. The wife's desire to maintain the status quo motivates her to withdraw, but demanding behavior is induced by her tendency to demand. In sum, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction occurs more frequently than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during conflict over the division of labor, but especially when the wife rather than the husband desires a change in her spouse's contribution to the division of labor (Hypothesis 1).

Status Quo Maintenance Versus Change

To what extent do spouses reach their goal when they dispute the division of labor? Kluwer *et al.* (1997b) showed that those in favor of the status quo were more likely to reach their goal than those who desired a change in the division of labor. Those who want change depend on the cooperation of the other spouse, that is, whether the other is willing to change his or her behavior. Those in favor of the status quo can reach their goal without the cooperation of the other party, simply by changing nothing. Consequently, they have a major advantage over those who want change: The status quo is on their side and this gives them more power over the outcome (cf. Keltner and Robinson, 1997; Pruitt, 1995).³ In general, changing the status quo involves the need to formulate new arrangements, transition costs, ambivalence, risk, and uncertainty. Hence, people tend to disproportionately stick with the status quo (Ritov and Baron, 1992; Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988). In addition, people are committed to their past decisions and often think that past alternatives have been chosen wisely (Schweitzer, 1994), and regulations that have been used in the past are frequently perceived as just (Homans, 1974; Mikula *et al.*, 1997b). (It should be noted that there is mixed evidence. For example, Reichle, 1996, reported that the tradition principle was among the two most rejected principles in the division of labor among spouses.)

³One could argue that defendants need the cooperation of complainants to maintain the status quo. For example, the husband who wants to maintain the current division of labor depends on his wife to keep doing her share. The wife has control over his outcome (i.e., the status quo) because she can stop doing housework altogether. However, this outcome is most likely worse for the wife than maintaining the status quo because in that situation the housework does not get done at all (see Kelley, 1979, p. 25). This suggests that complainants indeed have less control over the outcome than defendants because the complainant's influence strategy leads to a situation in which they are worse off than before.

Preference for the status quo can also be explained in terms of loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984; Ritov and Baron, 1992). Changing the status quo entails gains and losses across different dimensions. Since people are loss averse and losses weigh more heavily than commensurate gains, people will favor the current state of affairs. Consequently, loss aversion favors stability over change (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984). In addition, conflict parties' perspective on the conflict outcome (i.e., whether they face a potential loss or a potential gain) affects their concession behavior. Conflict parties who face a potential gain concede more and settle more easily than conflict parties who face a potential loss (see De Dreu *et al.*, 1995). A change from the status quo yields a potential loss for those in favor of the status quo, whereas it implies a potential gain for those who desire change. Accordingly, those who desire change may yield more easily than those who favor the status quo and, consequently, fail to reach their goal.

Kluwer *et al.* (1997b) also found that discontented women were more likely to accomplish change than discontented men when the complaint concerned their own gender stereotypical domain (i.e., family work). In fact, when wives wanted a change in their spouses' contribution, husbands and wives were equally successful in accomplishing their respective goals of status quo maintenance and change. An explanation for the finding that women were more successful than men in accomplishing change is that women's demanding behavior enhances their goal accomplishment. Coercion can be effective in unilateral goal accomplishment (De Dreu, 1995; Noller *et al.*, 1994; Patterson, 1982; Rubin *et al.*, 1994). Men's tendency to withdraw decreases their chance of goal accomplishment when they want to change the status quo. Withdrawal on the part of the discontent spouse results in status quo maintenance because no attempt is made to change the situation. Kluwer *et al.* (1997b) also suggested that women had more control over the outcomes because they possess greater knowledge, skill, and information with regard to the division of labor (cf. Babcock *et al.*, 1993; Cromwell and Olson, 1975; French and Raven, 1959). Accordingly, they can use their informational influence and expert power to accomplish change (cf. Brown *et al.*, 1990; Dovidio *et al.*, 1988).

The findings of Kluwer *et al.* (1997b) suggest that wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction increases the wife's chance of accomplishing change because her coercion and expert power makes her husband comply eventually. Husbands were found to withdraw when their wives wanted a change in their contribution and yet wives managed to accomplish a change in their husbands' contribution. This suggests that despite their initial resistance through withdrawal, husbands capitulated to their wives' persistent pressures and demands. In sum, this line of reasoning leads to the predic-

tion that discontent wives are more likely to accomplish change than discontent husbands (Coercion Hypothesis).

Kluwer *et al.*'s (1997b) results are puzzling for two reasons. First, the finding that wives were successful in accomplishing change in their husbands' contribution to family work contradicts reality. Wives tend to do more family work than their husbands despite their dissatisfaction with the gendered division of labor and these gendered patterns tend to persist (e.g., Biernat and Wortman, 1991; Spitze, 1988; Thompson and Walker, 1989). Second, the findings contradict the notion that withdrawal and conflict avoidance support the status quo. A way to maintain the current state of affairs is to change nothing and withdraw from a discussion that may lead to change. For these reasons, one would expect wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction to enhance the husband's chance of maintaining the status quo because his withdrawal is in favor of the status quo. This leads to the following prediction: Those in favor of the status quo are more likely to reach their goal than those who want to change the division of labor (Status Quo Effect Hypothesis).

Kluwer *et al.* (1997b) made inferences about the relationship between conflict behavior and conflict outcomes but did not actually test these relationships. Following the Coercion Hypothesis, one would predict that wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction is positively related to a change in the spouse's contribution (i.e., negatively related to status quo maintenance) when the wife wants to change the status quo. The same can be predicted for husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction when the husband wants to change the status quo. Following the Status Quo Effect Hypothesis, one would expect that wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction is negatively related to a change in the spouse's contribution (i.e., positively related to status quo maintenance) when the wife wants to change the status quo. Again, the same can be predicted for husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction when the husband wants to change the status quo.

Two other issues are addressed in the current study. First, Kluwer *et al.* (1997b) did not manipulate the direction of the desired change—it was unknown whether the discontent spouse wanted the other spouse to do *more* or *less* family work—which may have confounded the results. Participants may have reported a greater likelihood of change because it was unspecified. For example, actually making the spouse do more family work may be much harder to accomplish than an unspecified change in the spouse's contribution because the latter may be in either direction. In this study, the direction of the desired change is that the discontent spouse wants the other spouse to do more family work. Second, in addition to changes in the contribution of those who defend the status quo, this study

assesses changes in the contribution of those who desire change. Discontent spouses who want the other to do more family work may resolve this problem by doing it themselves. This study explores to what extent husbands and wives are likely to increase their *own contribution* to family work as a result of their dissatisfaction.

METHOD

Design and Scenario

To test the hypotheses, the present research adopted a scenario methodology similar to the studies reported by Kluwer *et al.* (1997b). The scenario described a conflict situation in which one spouse is discontented with the time the other spouse spends on housework or child care and wants the other spouse to spend more time on housework or child care, while the other spouse is satisfied with the status quo. The design was a 2×2 factorial, involving Discontent spouse (husband vs. wife) and Conflict issue (housework vs. child care), both manipulated between subjects. Conflict issue did not have any main or interaction effects in any of the analyses, so this variable is not discussed any further. Participants read a scenario in which they either had the role of the discontent spouse or the role of the content spouse. In the *Conflict issue is housework* condition, the scenarios read as follow:

You are dissatisfied about the time your spouse spends on household tasks. On the whole, you think that your spouse pays too little attention to housework, and spends too little time tidying, cleaning, doing the dishes, or doing groceries. In other words, you want your spouse to spend more time on housework. However, your spouse is satisfied with the situation as it is.

Your spouse is dissatisfied about the time you spend on household tasks. On the whole, your spouse thinks that you pay too little attention to housework, and spend too little time tidying, cleaning, doing the dishes, or doing groceries. In other words, your spouse wants you to spend more time on housework. However, you are satisfied with the situation as it is.

In the *Conflict issue is child care* condition a similar scenario was presented with examples adjusted to the conflict issue. The between-subjects factor Discontent spouse was construed by crossing gender of participant with the role in the scenario (discontent or content spouse). In other words, the *Discontent spouse is husband* condition contained male participants in the role of discontent spouse ("You are dissatisfied...") and female participants in the role of content spouse ("Your spouse is dissatisfied..."). The *Discontent spouse is wife* condition contained female par-

participants in the role of discontent spouse and male participants in the role of content spouse.

Participants and Procedure

Participants in the study were 98 husbands and 95 wives from the same couples. Spouses had shared a household for 6.7 years on average. To standardize the family situation of the couples and to control for the effects of the number and age of children, the criterion for selection was that the first and only child was under 18 months old ($\bar{x} = 14.4$, $SD = 1.2$). The mean ages of men and women were 32.7 and 30.5 years, respectively. Participants were in a research program on the division of labor during the transition to parenthood. Husbands and wives received their questionnaire in a separate envelope that was addressed to them personally. They were instructed not to discuss the questionnaire with their spouse until they each had completed it, and they returned their questionnaires in separate envelopes. Nonrespondents were reminded by phone. Eventually, 78% of the participants returned their completed questionnaire by mail. Participants were assigned to experimental conditions on a random basis. Due to small variations in the response rates between conditions and due to missing data, the number of participants in the conditions varied between 45 and 51, approximately half of which were male and half were female. As husbands and wives came from the same couples, their responses may be correlated (cf. Kenny, 1995). However, participants were assigned to experimental conditions on a random basis. Therefore, husbands' and wives' data were treated as independent observations in the analyses (cf. Kluwer *et al.*, 1997b).

Dependent Variables

Participants read the scenario and were instructed to try to imagine they were in the described situation, and to write down how they and their spouse would deal with the described situation. Three coders independently rated all answers to this open-ended question. Coders were uninformed as to the design or hypotheses under study and the gender of the participant, although the latter sometimes became apparent from the answer when participants explicitly mentioned their "husband" or "wife." instead of their "spouse" or "partner." Coders completed one day of training and independently rated all answers.

After reading the entire answer, coders rated the degree to which the answer represented the following behaviors (1 = *not representative* to 4 =

very representative): The participant pressures the spouse, blames the spouse, withdraws, and avoids. These categories were derived from the Conflict Rating System (i.e., the demand and withdraw subscale; Heavey *et al.*, 1993), which was developed to characterize the behavior of couples during problem-solving discussions (cf. Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Kluwer *et al.*, 1997b). The same items were used to rate the behavior of the spouse. Afterwards, data were recoded as to the gender of the participant (i.e., when the participant was male, "participant avoids" became "husband avoids" and when the participant was female, "participant avoids" became "wife avoids").

As a measure of interobserver agreement, Cronbach's alphas were computed between coders for each item. Alphas for the behavior items ranged from .61 to .87 with a mean of .77. As a measure of the consistency of the subscales, Cronbach's alphas were computed across the individual ratings for the items of the subscales. Following the Conflict Rating System, the demand subscale consisted of the items "pressuring the spouse" and "blaming the spouse" ($\alpha = .64$ for husband-demand and .69 for wife-demand). The withdraw-subscale consisted of the items "withdrawing" and "avoiding" ($\alpha = .64$ for husband-withdraw and .68 for wife-withdraw). Means were then computed across the individual ratings for the items of the demand and withdraw subscales. To create the demand/withdraw interaction scales, wife-demand and husband-withdraw were summed and husband-demand and wife-withdraw were summed (cf. Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Klinetob and Smith, 1996; Kluwer *et al.*, 1997b).

Finally, participants rated the likelihood of three conflict outcomes in the described situation (1 = *very unlikely* to 7 = *very likely*). In the *Conflict issue is housework* condition, participants in the role of discontent spouse rated the following outcomes: "My spouse's time spent on housework remains unchanged" (content spouse reaches goal), "My spouse spends *more* time on housework" (content spouse does more), and "I spend *more* time on housework" (discontent spouse does more). Participants in the role of content spouse rated the following outcomes: "My time spent on housework remains unchanged" (content spouse reaches goal), "I spend more time on housework" (content spouse does more), and "My spouse spends *more* time on housework" (discontent spouse does more). In the *Conflict issue is child care* condition, the same items were rated for child care instead of housework. The conflict outcome *content spouse reaches goal* represented status quo maintenance and the conflict outcome *content spouse does more* represented the desired change. The conflict outcome *discontent spouse does more* referred to the discontent spouse's own contribution to family work.

RESULTS

Demand/Withdraw Interaction

Hypothesis 1 was tested with a 2×2 (Discontent spouse \times Demand/withdraw interaction) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the last factor as repeated measures (see Fig. 1). The dependent variable was the rated degree to which the answer represented wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction and husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction. The main effect of Discontent spouse was not significant, $F(1, 184) = 0.77$, ns. The significant main effect of Demand/withdraw interaction, $F(1, 184) = 5.00$, $p < 0.05$, was qualified by a significant interaction effect of Discontent spouse by Demand/withdraw interaction, $F(1, 184) = 11.97$, $p < 0.001$. When the wife was discontent, participants reported more wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction ($\bar{x} = 2.39$) than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction ($\bar{x} = 2.18$), $t(96) = 3.56$, $p < 0.001$. When the husband was discontent, husband-demand/wife-withdraw ($\bar{x} = 2.26$) and wife-demand/husband-withdraw ($\bar{x} = 2.22$) interaction were reported equally, $t(88) = 1.06$, ns. Also, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was reported more often when the wife rather than the husband was discontent, $t(185) = 2.46$, $p < 0.05$, and husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction was reported equally when the husband or the wife was discontent, $t(184) = 1.54$, ns. In sum, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was more likely to occur than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during conflict over the division of labor, but only when the wife wanted an increase in her husband's contribution.

Conflict Outcomes

To test the Coercion Hypothesis and the Status Quo Effect Hypothesis, a 2×2 (Discontent spouse \times Conflict outcome) ANOVA was conducted, with the last factor as repeated measures. The dependent variable was the reported likelihood of status quo maintenance (content spouse reaches goal) and change (content spouse does more). This analysis revealed a significant main effect of Conflict outcome, $F(1, 189) = 141.71$, $p < 0.001$. Participants reported a greater likelihood that the content spouse would reach his/her goal ($\bar{x} = 3.57$) than that the content spouse would do more family work ($\bar{x} = 1.85$). The main effect of Discontent spouse was not significant, $F(1, 189) = 1.89$, ns, and neither was the interaction effect of Discontent spouse by Conflict outcome, $F(1, 189) = 0.17$, ns. These results lend support for the Status Quo Effect Hypothesis that

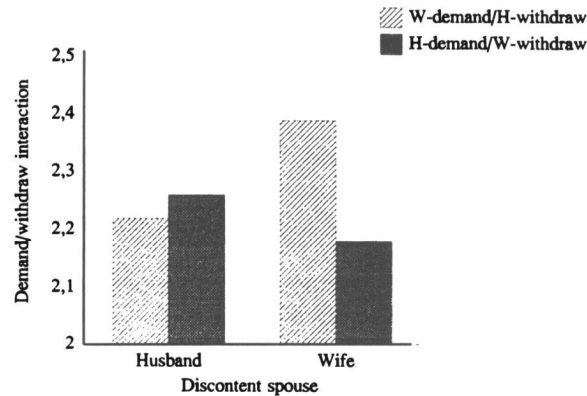


Fig. 1. Rated representativeness of demand/withdraw interaction as a function of Discontent spouse (H = husband, W = wife).

those in favor of the status quo are more likely to reach their goal than those who desired change. As participants did not report that discontent wives would be more likely accomplish change than discontent husbands, the data showed no support for the Coercion Hypothesis.

To explore the discontent spouse's own contribution, a 2×2 (Discontent spouse \times Conflict outcome) ANOVA was conducted, with the last factor as repeated measures. The dependent variable was the reported likelihood of an increase in the content spouse's contribution (content spouse does more) and the discontent spouse's contribution (discontent spouse does more). The significant main effects of Conflict outcome, $F(1, 188) = 81.55$, $p < 0.001$, and Discontent spouse, $F(1, 188) = 9.35$, $p < 0.01$, were qualified by a significant interaction effect of Discontent spouse by Conflict outcome, $F(1, 188) = 7.67$, $p < 0.01$ (Fig. 2). Participants reported a greater likelihood that the discontent spouse would increase his/her contribution than that the content spouse would increase his/her contribution, both when the husband was discontent ($\bar{x} = 3.44$ vs. $\bar{x} = 1.96$, respectively), $t(89) = 7.35$, $p < 0.001$, and when the wife was discontent ($\bar{x} = 2.55$ vs. $\bar{x} = 1.76$, respectively), $t(99) = 5.09$, $p < 0.001$. However, the reported likelihood that discontent husbands would increase their own contribution ($\bar{x} = 3.44$) was rated higher than the likelihood that discontent wives would increase their own contribution ($\bar{x} = 2.55$), $t(188) = 3.68$, $p < 0.001$. The reported likelihood that content husbands and content wives would increase their own contribution did not differ, $t(189) = 0.97$, ns.

To summarize, the data showed support for the Status Quo Effect Hypothesis: The likelihood that the content spouse's contribution to family

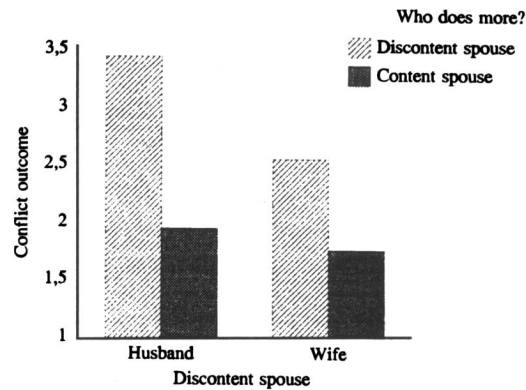


Fig. 2. Self-reported likelihood of conflict outcomes as a function of Discontent spouse.

work remained unchanged was rated higher than the likelihood that the content spouse would do more family work. The Coercion Hypothesis that discontent wives were more likely to accomplish change than discontent husbands was not supported. However, the likelihood that discontent wives would increase their *own contribution* was rated lower than the likelihood that discontent husbands would increase their own contribution.

Relationships Between Demand/Withdraw Interaction and Conflict Outcomes

Zero-order correlations between the rated demand/withdraw interaction patterns and self-reported conflict outcomes showed a significant negative relationship between wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction and the likelihood that the content spouse would do more family work when the wife was discontent (Table I). This implies that when the wife desired change, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction decreased the chance that her husband would do more family work. Again, this is in support of the Status Quo Effect Hypothesis. By contrast, when the husband was discontent, husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction was negatively related to the likelihood that the content spouse would reach his/her goal. This implies that when the husband desired change, husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction decreased the chance of status quo maintenance. This is in support of the Coercion Hypothesis. It should be noted here that the correlations are low and may reflect chance, as only 2 of 12 correlations were significant. Interpretations of these correlations should be made with caution.

Table I. Zero-Order Correlations Between Marital Interaction Patterns and Conflict Outcomes in both Discontent Spouse Conditions

	Status quo maintenance	Content spouse does more	Discontent spouse does more
Discontent husband condition			
H-demand/W-withdraw	-.34 ^b	.01	-.04
W-demand/H-withdraw	-.10	.11	-.08
Discontent wife condition			
H-demand/W-withdraw	.04	-.04	-.15
W-demand/H-withdraw	-.03	-.25 ^a	-.15

^a $p < 0.01$.

^b $p < 0.001$.

DISCUSSION

This research investigated husbands' and wives' responses to discontent due to gender inequality in the division of family work, as well as the outcomes of those responses. It tested the prediction that wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction would occur more frequently than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during conflict over family work, but especially when the wife desired an increase in her spouse's contribution. Furthermore, this study tested two competing predictions with regard to the outcomes of conflict over the division of family work. The *Coercion Hypothesis* predicted that discontent wives would be more likely to accomplish change than discontent husbands because wives' demanding behavior and expert power would make their husbands yield. The *Status Quo Effect Hypothesis* predicted that those in favor of the status quo are more likely to reach their goal than those who seek change because their withdrawal is in favor of the status quo.

As predicted, participants reported more wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction when the wife was discontent, but husband-demand/wife-withdraw and wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction were reported equally when the husband was discontent. Accordingly, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was more likely to occur than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction in response to the scenario, but only when the wife wanted her spouse to do more family work. This replicates the findings from Kluwer *et al.* (1997b). In addition, the data show support for the *Status Quo Effect Hypothesis*: Participants reported a greater likelihood that the content spouse would reach his/her goal (i.e., status quo maintenance) than that the content spouse would increase his/her contribution to family work. This implies that those in favor of the status quo are more likely to reach their

goal than those who desired change. In line with this, when the wife was discontent, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was negatively related to the reported likelihood that the husband would do more family work. The data do not replicate Kluwer *et al.*'s (1997b) finding that discontent women were more likely than discontent men to accomplish change in the domain of family work. Since both studies showed support for the status quo effect, the conclusion seems warranted that those who favor the status quo maintain the status quo by withdrawing from discussions that might lead to change and new arrangements. Their advantage is likely to stem from the fact that they have more power over the outcome because the status quo is on their side (cf. Keltner and Robinson, 1997).

Following prior research (Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Heavey *et al.*, 1993; Kluwer *et al.*, 1997b), this research provides evidence that the structure of the conflict issue combined with the gender linkage in behavior causes couples' response to gender inequality to become highly stereotyped. Many areas of gender inequality involve domains where men benefit from the status quo and women desire change. Accordingly, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction is likely to be the response to gender inequality in close relationships. Wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction is generally associated with destructive consequences, such as polarization, conflict escalation, and marital distress (Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Gottman, 1979; Heavey *et al.*, 1993; Kluwer *et al.*, 1997a). The current study shows that it is also negatively associated with actual change. Consequently, this research identifies an important barrier to the negotiation of new arrangements and gender roles.

Surprisingly, husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction was negatively related to the likelihood of status quo maintenance when the husband was discontent. In other words, the wife's withdrawal did not seem to help her maintain the status quo. Perhaps husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction results in other outcomes, such as an integrative agreement or hiring others to do family work (e.g., a housekeeper or nanny). Research revealed that husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction had a positive effect on later marital satisfaction (Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Heavey *et al.*, 1993). Heavey *et al.* argued that couples who display nonstereotyped roles are able to avoid the increasing polarization and rigidity that is associated with stereotyped gender behavior (i.e., wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction). In addition, wives generally react positively to their husbands' willingness to discuss relationship issues (Acitelli, 1992), and may perceive their husband's demanding behavior as commitment to the relationship. In addition, husbands tend to complain much less than wives (Kluwer *et al.*, 1997a). Consequently, wives may be more receptive to their husband's complaints and couples may respond in more positive ways when the husband

rather than the wife is discontent. Future research should address to what extent spouses respond in constructive ways and manage to reach integrative solutions during conflict about the division of labor.

The data further show that participants report a greater likelihood for discontent spouses than for content spouses to increase their *own contribution*, but discontent husbands are more likely to do so than discontent wives. This implies that discontent spouses are more likely to do the extra work themselves when they feel their spouse does not contribute enough, but husbands are more inclined to do so than wives. Husbands may feel it is not legitimate to complain about their wives' contribution as most wives already do most of the family work. Men tend to perceive themselves as advantaged in close relationships (Buunk and VanYperen, 1989). Because people tend to dislike advantageous inequity (Messick and Sentis, 1985; Hatfield *et al.*, 1984; Walster *et al.*, 1978), men may be more inclined to increase their own contribution to family work, despite their discontent, because they perceive the overall division of labor is inequitable in their advantage. This has been extensively analyzed and described as the existential guilt effect of the privileged (Montada *et al.*, 1986; Montada and Schneider, 1989).

How do these findings relate to the issue of justice? Justice literature shows that people are interested in issues of process rather than issues of outcome and that fair procedures are important (see Lind and Tyler, 1988, for an overview). Individuals who are given voice judge not only the procedure as more fair but also the outcome as more fair than individuals who are not given voice (Lind *et al.*, 1990) and voice in decision-making results in greater satisfaction with the outcome (Folger *et al.*, 1979). In close relationships, the ability to voice views and opinions causes conflicting spouses to be more satisfied with the conflict outcome and perceive the outcome as more fair. Withdrawal on the part of one of the spouses clearly prohibits voice and has a negative impact on satisfaction and fairness judgments. A longitudinal study by Kluwer *et al.* (1998) showed that, rather than affecting the actual contributions of each spouse, the way spouses negotiated the division of labor affected wives' satisfaction and fairness judgments. Their research showed support for the *voice effect* (cf. Folger, 1977): Independent of the actual division of labor, wives' satisfaction and perceived fairness were related to whether the division of labor was discussed in constructive ways. In sum, the way spouses manage conflict over the division of labor affects their satisfaction and fairness judgments with regard to the division of labor.

A few limitations to this research deserve attention. First, the self-report nature of this study and the hypothetical character of the scenarios merely allows for conclusions about couples' beliefs about marital interac-

tion patterns in a hypothetical situation. Although prior research suggests that the hypothetical situations used in this study occur in couples' lives (Kluwer *et al.*, 1997b), the scenarios were still hypothetical and undetermined in terms of how removed they were from real life.

Second, the scenarios did not contain information about the absolute or relative amount of work done by spouses. This may have caused the meaning of the scenarios to be ambiguous, especially in the case of discontent husbands. Participants may have assumed that the discontent husband in the scenario was doing more family work than his wife or, perhaps more likely, that he was doing less family work than his wife but nevertheless experienced discontent over her contribution. In the latter case, it may not be surprising that discontent husbands were rated more likely to increase their own contribution than discontent wives. Hence, the meaning participants attached to the scenario has implications for the interpretation of the results and the interpretations of the results on conflict outcomes should be made with caution. I emphasize, however, that this study focused explicitly on spouses' reactions to discontent over the division of labor. The objective imbalance in the division of labor may thus have less impact on participants' ratings. Nevertheless, further research is needed in which the objective imbalance in the division of labor is taken into account. For example, it would be interesting to study whether objective imbalances are recognized by spouses and whether they perceive them as unjust (cf. Mikula *et al.*, 1997b).

Finally, the conclusions are limited to couples who have recently experienced their transition to first-time parenthood as these constituted the research population. The transition to parenthood generally involves increases in marital distress and conflict, and the division of family work tends to become more traditional (Belsky *et al.*, 1986; Cowan *et al.*, 1985; Grote and Clark, 1998; Hackel and Ruble, 1992; Kluwer *et al.*, 1998; Reichle and Montada, 1994). Major life changes such as the transition to parenthood often lead couples to reexamine their prior arrangements and reframe relationship events so as to accentuate perceptions of injustice and imbalance (Holmes and Levinger, 1994). The new division of labor generates considerable discontent for wives because they feel that their husbands are not living up to their expectancies (Hackel and Ruble, 1992). Negative emotions related to feelings of injustice for which the spouse is blamed may have serious negative consequences (Reichle, 1996). Conflict over the division of labor is thus more salient and more likely to occur among couples who just had their first child than among, for example, childless couples.

To conclude, this study provides both a structural and a behavioral explanation for the persistence of gender inequality and gendered patterns of role allocation. The effects of conflict structure and gender-linked be-

haviors pertain to close relationships in general. More broadly, the *status quo effect* pertains to any situation in which one conflict party (e.g., spouse, employee, minority) desires a change in the current situation whereas the other party (e.g., other spouse, employer, majority) wants to maintain the status quo. A promising direction for future research is to examine the mediating processes of the status quo effect and important moderator variables, both inside and outside the domain of close relationships.

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